

## **Stop the weaponization of humanitarian aid by the Myanmar military junta**

*Prioritize the provision of humanitarian aid through local civil society and community-based organizations*

On the occasion of the World Refugee Day, 488 civil society organizations call on the United Nations and international community to ensure that provision of humanitarian aid is not weaponized by the junta in their campaign of terror against the people of Myanmar. To avoid this, the UN agencies, international donors and humanitarian organizations must prioritize the provision of humanitarian aid through local civil society and humanitarian organizations, ethnic service providers, including cross-border aid, to best support those affected by the humanitarian and human rights crisis unfolding in Myanmar as a direct result of the military's brutal attacks following its unlawful coup attempt on February 1. The groups also call on countries neighboring Myanmar to protect the rights of refugees fleeing the military's violence.

Over a quarter of a million people have been displaced in ethnic areas since the start of the Myanmar military's failed coup. The military junta has repeatedly impeded the delivery of humanitarian assistance to those in need. They are thus using the dire humanitarian situation of those who have been displaced to weaponize humanitarian aid, withholding it as part of their campaign of terror.

Under international humanitarian law, all parties to the conflict must "facilitate the free passage of humanitarian assistance." Contravening this, the military has blocked humanitarian aid from being delivered to many ethnic areas while deliberately destroying people's food storage including in Karen, Kachin, Karenni, Chin and Shan States. The most salient case was the 8 June burning of rice, medicine and other essential humanitarian aid, as well as the vehicle carrying the aid that was on its way to Pekhön Township where some of the 100,000 Karenni IDPs have been sheltering. "Willfully impeding relief supplies" as a tactic of starvation is considered a method of warfare and is a war crime. In addition, the military has targeted and intimidated humanitarian aid workers and volunteers, killing, injuring, arbitrarily arresting and torturing those who work on the frontlines.

COVID-19 has added another layer of insecurity in the already deteriorating human rights and humanitarian crisis, as rising cases lead to lockdowns in towns across Myanmar. The military had been weaponizing COVID-19 to crack down on prodemocracy activists, human rights defenders and journalists prior to the coup. In keeping with this pattern, the junta has seized on the opportunity to leverage the administration of vaccines to crack down on the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Worsening the humanitarian crisis compounded by COVID-19, in Hpa-An, Karen State, junior doctors have been urged to leave the CDM in order to receive their second dose of the vaccine. They received their first dose before the coup but refused to take the second vaccine under such conditions.

Meanwhile, activists and supporters of the Spring Revolution, as well as ethnic people who are under threat from the military's airstrikes and artillery shelling continue to attempt to escape the military's violence but have not been able to seek refuge in neighboring countries of Thailand and India. In Thailand, refugees who seek temporary refuge have been unable to access the assistance of the UNHCR and INGOs. Instead, they have been sent back to Karen State where they continue to face the threat of attacks by the Myanmar military.

Let us be reminded on this day that the current mass human rights and humanitarian crisis unfolding in Myanmar was triggered and has been shaped by the brutal, violent, unrelenting, murderous, and oppressive actions of the Myanmar military. This is the same military that committed genocide against the Rohingya in Rakhine State and has been committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in ethnic areas for decades. The extreme and heinous violence has been committed by one side, led by a criminal who must be tried and

held to account for grave international crimes. It disheartens those who have made immense sacrifices to protect and promote the values and principles of humanity when humanitarianism is used to mask the absence of action to address the root causes and hold accountable the perpetrators of the humanitarian crisis. Lending legitimacy to this junta is counterproductive to ending this humanitarian crisis and goes against the wishes of those who are sacrificing so much to resist and can even further embolden and enable this junta to carry on with its terror acts.

The United Nations and international community must focus its work on assisting local CSOs, particularly the ethnic service providers, to address the current human rights and humanitarian crisis. The neighboring countries and ASEAN must protect the people fleeing from Myanmar to seek refuge and cooperate with the UN and international community. The regional CSOs' support and solidarity in this struggle has been vital and strengthens our resolve to continue to resist the brutal military junta.

On World Refugee Day, we must listen to the voices of refugees worldwide and recognize and strengthen their agency and the role of those displaced inside Myanmar and outside, the local hosts and ethnic service providers that continue to assist them, often at great personal risk. The current unfolding crisis in Myanmar may be one of the biggest challenges they have faced. However, they have served the needs of their communities under the iron fist of previous military rule and decades of offensives by the same military, and now they continue to uphold the values of humanity, dignity, and rights with courage while having to endure immense suffering. As neighboring countries refuse to take in refugees, turning them away at the border without adequate assistance, it is the local CSOs who have stepped in to fill the void, despite limited resources and constraints placed by the military. They deserve nothing less than our full support and genuine partnership.

We call on the United Nations and international community to:

- Ensure that provision of humanitarian aid does not legitimize the military and does not enable the military to further weaponize humanitarian aid in their campaign of terror;
- Recognize the role of and provide humanitarian assistance through local service providing civil society and community-based organizations, including cross-border aid;
- Take direction from and consult and collaborate with the National Unity Government and ethnic armed organizations in provision of aid;
- Disengage from working relations with the junta in the provision of humanitarian aid;
- Provide flexible and timely funds and resources to local civil society and community-based organizations that have robust and effective systems for providing emergency support;
- Urge neighboring countries to protect the rights of refugees by allowing them to take refuge and access to UNHCR and INGOs as well as humanitarian organizations for their immediate and unimpeded assistance.

Signed by 488 civil society organizations including:

1. African Great Lakes Action Network
2. American Baptist Churches of Nebraska
3. American Baptist Churches USA
4. Arakan American Community (AAC)
5. Arakan Watch
6. Burma Human Rights Network
7. Burma Task Force
8. Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK)
9. Calgary Karen Community Association (CKCA)

10. California Karen Youth Forum
11. Canadian Rohingya Development Initiative
12. Chin Baptist Churches USA
13. Coalition of Rohingya Organisations in Malaysia
14. Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, KY
15. DEEKU, the Karenni Community, USA
16. Edmonton Karen Community Youth Organization
17. European Karen Network
18. Finland Karen Culture Association
19. Free Burma Campaign (South Africa)
20. Ignite Ministry, Inc
21. International Karen Organisation
22. Kachin Alliance
23. Kachin Peace Support Network
24. Kansas Karenni Community, KS, USA
25. Karen Association of Huron, SD, USA
26. Karen Community of Akron, OH, USA
27. Karen Community of Canada (KCC)
28. Karen Community of Czech Republic
29. Karen Community of Finland
30. Karen Community of Hamilton
31. Karen Community of Iowa, IA, USA
32. Karen Community of Ireland
33. Karen Community of Israel
34. Karen Community of Kansas City, KS & MO, USA
35. Karen Community of Kitchener & Waterloo
36. Karen Community of Leamington
37. Karen Community of Lethbridge
38. Karen Community of London
39. Karen Community of Minnesota, MN, USA
40. Karen Community of North Carolina, NC, USA
41. Karen Community of Ottawa
42. Karen Community of Regina
43. Karen Community of Rock Island, IL, USA
44. Karen Community of Saskatoon
45. Karen Community of Syracuse, USA
46. Karen Community of Thunderbay
47. Karen Community of Toronto
48. Karen Community of Windsor
49. Karen Community of Winnipeg
50. Karen Community Society of British Columbia (KCSBC)
51. Karen Organization of America
52. Karen Organization of San Diego
53. Karen Peace Support Network
54. Karen Swedish Community
55. Karen Youth Education Pathways

56. Karen Youth of Norway
57. Karen Youth of Toronto
58. Karen Youth Organization
59. Karenni Community of Bowling Green, KY, USA
60. Karenni Community of Des Moines, IA, USA
61. Karenni Community of Georgia, GA, USA
62. Karenni Community of Indianapolis, IN, USA
63. Karenni Community of Massachusetts, MA, USA
64. Karenni community of Minnesota, MN, USA
65. Karenni Community of Missouri, MO, USA
66. Karenni Community of New York, NY, USA
67. Karenni Community of North Carolina, NC, USA
68. Karenni Community of Portland, OR, USA
69. Karenni Community of Texas, TX, USA
70. Karenni Community of Wisconsin, WI, USA
71. Karenni National Women's Organization
72. Karenni Refugee Committee
73. Karenni Refugee Committee
74. Karenni Society of Minnesota, MN, USA
75. Korea Karen Organization
76. Korea Karen Youth Organization
77. Never Again Coalition
78. Oversea Karen Organization Japan
79. Progressive Voice
80. Rohingya American Society
81. Rohingya Arakanese Refugee Committee
82. Rohingya Student Network
83. Rohingya Women Development Forum
84. The Sound of Hope
85. The Urban Village
86. US Campaign for Burma
87. Utica Karen Community, NY, US

Note: Due to serious security concerns, names of 401 local civil society organizations who endorsed and signed this statement cannot be disclosed. The signed CSOs work on range of humanitarian, human rights protection, and rights-based issues in Myanmar.

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